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SUBJECT: Confronting Challenges to Humanitarian Operations in West Darfur

SUMMARY

¶11. (SBU) From April 15 to 17, USAID's Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (USAID/OFDA) field officers visited El Geneina, West Darfur, for the first time since July 2008. There they discussed the impact of the early March non-governmental organization (NGO) expulsions on humanitarian programs in West Darfur and remaining organizations' plans to address gaps in assistance. The team met with USAID/OFDA-funded NGOs including Medair, Catholic Relief Services (CRS), International Medical Corps (IMC), and Tearfund, as well as UN agencies including the UN World Health Organization (WHO), the UN Joint Logistics Center (UNJLC), the UN World Food Program (WFP), and the UN Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS). Partners reported that insecurity in West Darfur remains a major constraint to program implementation in the area, hampering the provision of humanitarian assistance to conflict-affected populations. According to USAID/OFDA discussions with remaining NGOs, the latter plan to expand areas of operation and programs to address gaps left by expelled NGOs in West Darfur, including in food security, food and emergency relief supply distributions, health, nutrition, protection, and water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH). Despite remaining organizations' attempts to address gaps in the health sector, health partners report that the West Darfur State Ministry of Health's (SMOH) refusal to acknowledge gaps, together with weak coordination by the UN health-sector cluster lead, has delayed the remaining health-sector partners from quantifying gaps, assessing the available capacity to address gaps, and coordinating a timely response. End Summary.

BACKGROUND

¶12. (U) The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs mapping department conceptually divides West Darfur State into western West Darfur and eastern West Darfur for logistical reasons. Western West Darfur houses the West Darfur state capital of El Geneina. This area comprises the northern corridor, the area north of El Geneina town; the southwest corridor, the area directly to the south of Geneina; the southern corridor, the area stretching from El Geneina south to Habila and on to Foro Baranga; and the eastern corridor, the area east of El Geneina to Zalingei.

¶13. (U) The eastern part of West Darfur includes the Zalingei, Wadi Salih, Mukjar, Um Dukhum, and Jebel Marra areas. As some humanitarian agencies working in eastern West Darfur access programs through South Darfur for logistic reasons and are not present in El Geneina town, communication and travel have been limited to El Geneina and discussions with partners based in the town focus mostly on the western region of West Darfur State.

USAID/OFDA PARTNERS IN WEST DARFUR

¶4. (U) To provide basic services to conflict-affected populations, USAID/OFDA currently supports seven international NGOs in West Darfur: World Relief, Concern, Terre Des Hommes, CRS, Tearfund, IMC, and Medair, as well as several UN agencies. From April 15 to 17, USAID/OFDA field officers traveled to West Darfur to meet with partners CRS, IMC, Medair, Tearfund, UNJLC, WHO, WFP, and UNDSS. Prior to its expulsion in early March, Save the Children/U.S. (SC/US) was a key USAID/OFDA partner in western West Darfur. Following the expulsions, the closure of SC/US programs in all four geographic corridors in western West Darfur created significant humanitarian gaps in the food security and agriculture, coordination, health, nutrition, protection, education, and WASH sectors, as well as the provision of emergency relief supplies. In addition, USAID/OFDA partner CARE, which was also expelled in March, supported transportation of emergency relief supplies for the Non-Food Item (NFI) Common Pipeline and NFI distributions in limited locations in the northern and eastern corridors of western West Darfur. CARE also supported food distributions in the Wadi Salih, Mukjar, and Um Dukhum areas of eastern West Darfur, and expelled NGO Mercy Corps supported NFI distributions and WASH programs in Wadi Salih, Mukjar, Um Dukhum, and Zalingei.

POTENTIAL "GAP Filling"

¶5. (SBU) USAID/OFDA-funded partner CRS is considering significantly
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increasing operations and doubling capacity in West Darfur to address gaps in assistance caused by the expulsions, predominantly in WASH, food security, food and NFI distributions, and shelter. CRS currently operates north of El Geneina along the northern corridor; however, to address gaps left by SC/US, CRS is considering expanding activities in areas such as Beida to the southeast of El Geneina and areas in the southern corridor, such as Habila and Foro Baranga. CRS also is considering filling gaps in Wadi Salih, Mukjar, and Um Dukhum left by expelled NGO partners CARE and Mercy Corps in food security, provision of NFIs, and WASH. CRS is currently a WFP implementing partner in the northern corridor and has a beneficiary load of 160,000 individuals. Following the expulsions, CRS signed a cooperative agreement with WFP to assume control of 27 food distribution points in the southern corridor, which will add a further 263,000 beneficiaries to the organization's caseload. CRS currently distributes dry rations as well as supporting health messaging in supplementary feeding programs (SFP) for 7,000 beneficiaries in the northern corridor. In cooperation with WFP, the organization plans to increase its caseload to support 14,000 new beneficiaries in SFPs in the new areas of operation. CRS has also signed agreements with the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) to construct 1,350 latrines, provide support for solid waste management, distribute soap, and promote hygiene for 45,000 beneficiaries in the southern corridor and Mukjar areas.

¶6. (U) CRS is working with UNJLC to distribute NFIs to 10,000 beneficiaries prior to the onset of the annual summer rainy season. Since mid-March, CRS has successfully dispatched ten international staff from its regional office in Kenya to support the Sudan team with internal operations, assessments, and recruitment of eight senior national staff employees. CRS anticipates establishing three sub-offices located in Habila, Mukjar, and Um Dukhum to adequately address the program expansions. State-level officials from all appropriate line ministries in El Geneina have approved CRS' technical agreements, and CRS is coordinating with appropriate UN cluster leads in the various sectors on potential expansions.

¶7. (SBU) Over the past six months, insecurity has limited Tearfund's ability to maintain a physical presence in Beida locality in the southwest corridor, the current location of the organization's USAID/OFDA-funded activities. In Beida, Tearfund has had to balance the provision of humanitarian assistance with safety

amid tensions between Arab and African ethnic groups and nomadic populations. On March 22, Tearfund relocated staff from the area due to threats of international staff abductions. On April 14, UN security canceled Tearfund's attempts to resume one-day visits to the area, due to reports of significant movements by Chadian armed opposition groups in the area and possible incursions into Chad. Tearfund confirmed that while it has been able to implement and monitor USAID/OFDA-funded programs remotely from El Geneina, the programs have suffered from decreased output and quality due to lack of direct supervision. Tearfund is currently conducting an internal assessment and analysis on how it might address humanitarian gaps; however, it has not yet developed any concrete plans to expand operations.

¶8. (SBU) Historically, international NGOs in West Darfur have benefited from supportive Sudanese government officials, including the El Geneina Humanitarian Aid Commission (HAC), as well as line ministries, according to USAID/OFDA partners in the area. Thanks to this supportive atmosphere, NGOs in West Darfur typically have been able to implement humanitarian programs relatively easily compared to other Darfur states, where NGOs experience significant bureaucratic obstacles to program implementation. For instance, the Government of National Unity Office of Water and Environmental Sanitation in West Darfur, with support from UNICEF as the sector lead, has actively facilitated access for NGOs that have expressed an interest in conducting assessments aimed at filling gaps. However, during USAID/OFDA's recent visit, both Medair and IMC reported that the SMOH has been reluctant to permit NGOs to conduct assessments in West Darfur to quantify gaps in the health sector.

¶9. (SBU) According to Medair and IMC, the SMOH is unwilling to admit the existence of gaps in the health system created by the expulsion of SC/US. SMOH asserts that government-sponsored agencies are addressing all gaps in the health sector created by the expulsions and that national NGOs are expected to take over and support programs in the long-term. Although both Medair and IMC have requested permits to assess health gaps in various locations, the West Darfur State HAC has denied them access. The SMOH stated that Sudanese doctors working in Darfur until the end of April and the Egyptian doctors, who are expected to arrive in Darfur soon, will be able to fill the gaps. The SMOH's approach has alarmed the UN World Health Organization (WHO), as the NGO expulsions

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interrupted referral systems and disrupted early warning systems, reducing the health sector's capacity and ability to respond to health-related emergencies. WHO reports that only six of the 15 primary health care centers located in West Darfur previously supported by expelled NGOs were functioning as of mid-April.

¶10. (U) While doctors arriving from Khartoum were tasked to fill health gaps in the three Darfur states, most have preferred to remain in urban areas, leaving rural areas and non-government-controlled areas without essential medical services. Furthermore, it remains unclear how rapidly the Egyptian doctors will be able to depart for Sudan and become operational upon arrival. In a meeting with the WHO Emergency Coordinator on April 27, WHO mentioned that the federal MOH has requested assistance from WHO to provide logistical support for the team of Egyptian doctors once they arrive in Sudan.

UN SECTOR LEADS

¶11. (SBU) The UN in Sudan officially adopted the cluster approach to programming under the 2009 Work Plan for Sudan. The main objective of the cluster system is to ensure coordination among UN agencies through joint programming, information sharing, knowledge sharing on technical and policy issues, and the joint formulation of sector/thematic strategies. This approach to programming also is aimed at synergizing program implementation by combining support and common services and provides a mechanism for the UN to interface with the government on thematic issues as they relate to broader policy strategies and program implementation. WHO is the health sector lead under the cluster approach. Despite the organization's

role as sector lead, partners in West Darfur expressed frustration with WHO's lack of leadership capacity in coordination and information sharing, noting that the health sector lacks a coordinated approach to responding to the current gaps in humanitarian assistance.

SECURITY

¶12. (SBU) Lack of access to conflict-affected populations due to insecurity continues to hamper the delivery of humanitarian assistance in West Darfur. Between April 1 and 15, the UN reported an upsurge in security incidents in the state, including carjackings, temporary staff abductions, banditry, robberies, and assaults on humanitarian premises. According to UN security officials, assailants broke into 13 humanitarian compounds in El Geneina from late February to March 2009, compared to almost no assaults on compounds in 2008. To decrease the likelihood of carjackings, the UN has reverted to using minivans in town and traveling in convoys when possible. Although the curfew in El Geneina town is 2000 hours local time, WFP requires that all vehicles return inside the compound by 1630 hours. Due to decreased security, partners reported that NGOs accessed most projects via air.

¶13. (SBU) During the USAID/OFDA visit to West Darfur, Tamer Saad El Derini, head of UNDSS in West Darfur, reported a relatively calm security situation in El Geneina town. However, on April 12, Sudanese government security officials alerted the UN of a potential kidnapping threat targeting foreign humanitarian aid workers. While the security officials did not disclose the source or extent of the threat, the UN is actively monitoring security in El Geneina and has increased surveillance monitoring systems to allow UN security to respond efficiently and rapidly to potential incidents. In collaboration with local police and security officials, UNDSS has established police checkpoints in areas of town with high concentrations of NGOs. UNDSS has also equipped police at the checkpoints with VHF radios programmed with the UN frequency, so that police can directly contact the UN radio room. Furthermore, all international NGOs have programmed radios to contain the U.N.-African Union Mission in Darfur (UNAMID) frequency on a dedicated channel to initiate quick response in event of a security incident. UNAMID and the Sudanese government have also increased the number of joint patrols throughout the night in El Geneina.

¶14. (SBU) El Derini reported that El Geneina currently is experiencing a visible increase in the movement of armed elements within the town. On April 13, the Sudanese government and Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) put on a show of force, demonstrating an increase in military equipment and other assets by flying four fighter jets from the airport and conducting a parade through town. The heavy

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presence and build-up of Chadian armed opposition forces in West Darfur towns pose a threat to NGOs' security and have limited program implementation in the area. For example, on April 14, lack of security forced CRS to suspend an assessment mission to Foro Baranga. During an assessment the week of April 5, UN security observed a similar increased presence of armed military personal in Beida. In early to mid-April, UN security also received confirmed reports that approximately 5,000 members of Chadian armed opposition groups were moving from Habila, West Darfur, into Chad. El Derini notes that troop movement across the borders is not unusual prior to the onset of the rainy season, as this period is the optimum time for military operations on both sides. The UN is concerned about a potential outbreak of violence should either side attempt to exercise force.

COMMENT AND CONCLUSION

¶15. (SBU) The mid-April visit to El Geneina confirmed the existence of significant humanitarian assistance gaps in food security, food and NFI distributions, WASH, health, nutrition, and protection, due

to the expulsion of key NGO partners, particularly SC/US, CARE, and Mercy Corps. Remaining international and national NGOs are coordinating and cooperating with government authorities and UN agencies to address critical gaps while at the same time planning, strategizing, and seeking funds to support longer-term solutions. Supported by UN cluster leads, the majority of line ministries demonstrate a willingness to coordinate and facilitate assessments and future planning with NGO partners, with the notable exception of the SMOH, which continues to insist that government interventions are adequately addressing current gaps, and that national NGOs will cover future gaps. As the health sector lead, WHO has been unable to change SMOH's view or policy. As a result, plans for long-term solutions in the health sector remain problematic.

¶16. (SBU) The visit also confirmed that the fragile security situation in El Geneina has had a marked impact on humanitarian operations. A pervasive atmosphere of anxiety and tension exists in the international community due to the military build-up, movements along the Sudan-Chad border, and increased criminality. The militarization of West Darfur, due largely to the Sudan-Chad proxy war, continues to be an impediment to humanitarian service delivery in this fragile area.

FERNANDEZ